

The Scientific Side of the Hot Salmon Bite!

by Jayna A. Schaaf, Fisheries Technician

The California Recreational Fisheries Survey, or "CRFS," began in 2004 as an improvement over the earlier Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey. CRFS has also begun collecting tagged salmon heads for DFG's Ocean Salmon Project (OSP). In this article, Fisheries Technician Jayna Schaaf, who began sampling with the OSP before the CRFS was created, takes us through one of her busier days during a hot salmon bite. As a CRFS sampler, Jayna collects marine sport fishing data to help monitor and manage California's marine resources.

I wake to my buzzing alarm clock at 7 a.m.—no time to drag my feet! It's a brisk Saturday morning here in Monterey County, and the weather is perfect for fishing.

I dress quickly and clip on my I.D. badge, which reads, "Jayna Schaaf, Fisheries Technician." My left shoulder bears the familiar blue-and-yellow Department of Fish and Game shield, and on my right shoulder I wear the red-and-white insignia of the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission.

Before leaving the house, I check my assortment of sampling gear: measuring board, 8-inch serrated knife, brass scales, plastic baggies, clip board, forms, sunscreen, and lots of sharp no. 2 pencils. Jumping into my car, I drive the short distance to Moss Landing's main launch ramp off Highway 1 in central California. A rush of excitement hits me, and a quick inhale of breath follows as I glance at the parking lot, brimming with 100

private skiff trailers! Moss Landing launch ramp is one of the primary private/rental boat launch sites in Monterey County. As I suspected, it's going to be a busy day.

As a California Recreational Fisheries Survey (CRFS) sampler, I collect demographic information from anglers, recording their catch and fishing location data, and measuring the lengths of as many fish as possible. Some quick math tells me there are about 200 anglers out today who could be landing

twice that number of king salmon (chinook), and other species of fish as well. I park my luxurious, mobile "office" — which comes complete with a steering wheel, stick shift, and a great view through the windshield — close to the ramp, and wait for the anglers to return.

The returning boat rush starts early. By 8 a.m., five skiffs are competing for dock space, and trailers have lined up to pull them out. My strategy is to intercept the anglers at the dock without holding up trailer traffic or, if necessary, interview anglers at the wash-down station. My goal is to not miss a single boat.

"How'd you guys do today?" I ask with a smile, formally introducing myself to each boatload of anglers: "Hi, I'm Jayna, and I am collecting biological data regarding fish. I would like ask you a few questions about your fishing trip and see any fish you have landed."

Today the salmon bite is hot, and anglers have come from all over the state to fish in Monterey Bay. I ask every angler the same set of questions: how many aboard were fishing, how many are licensed, the fishing location and water depth (I pull out a map to assist them in locating fishing grounds), what type of gear they used, and how many fish of each species were landed or released. After a year as a CRFS sampler, my questions flow like friendly fishing banter.

For me, though, the exciting part is examining each angler's catch. I hop into, out of, and between the boats and trailers like a bouncing pinball, quickly gathering data on each boat's fish, from silvery-purple salmon with beautifully spotted tails to California halibut, with lips curled down like grumpy old men. Rockfish season has just opened in the area, and I find icy coolers packed with colorful rockfish, like jewels in a treasure chest. My fish identification has to be quick and accurate; on this busy morning I only have a few minutes per boat. Even though I work quickly and diligently, I still end up with a fresh coat of salmon blood on my hands and a rockfish-spined finger.

One angler's king salmon is missing its adipose fin (the small fleshy lobe on the fish's back between "Hot salmon bite" continued on page 5



Jayna Schaaf at the Moss Landing launch ramp
photo courtesy J. Schaaf



Salmon fishermen with their catch
photo courtesy E. Roberts

the dorsal fin and the tail fin), which marks it as a tagged salmon. About 10 percent of hatchery-reared chinook have tiny coded-wire tags implanted in their snouts, after which the adipose fins are clipped. One of my most important duties is to check each salmon for the presence of this fin, and ask for any tagged salmon heads so that the tag – and its precious data – can be recovered.

About one in four anglers reacts negatively to a request for a salmon head. I've smoothed over many such encounters by explaining to the angler why we take the heads, and the resulting benefits to salmon populations. I've also reminded anglers that Section 8226 of the Fish and Game Code says that anglers "...upon request by an authorized agent...of the Department, [must] immediately relinquish the head of the salmon to the State..." Fortunately, this angler has participated in the survey before and is happy to allow me to remove the salmon's head.

Later that day, as I place 12 chinook heads in the cooler, the next boat arrives. An angler from the boat calls out to me sarcastically, "What are you going to do with all those heads, eat them?" As I complete the interview and begin to examine the angler's catch, I find a coho, or "silver" salmon. Unfortunately, possession of this endangered fish is prohibited in California marine waters. The angler is taken aback when I tell him that he has landed a coho. On top of this, the coho is missing its adipose fin. I take the head.

"You gonna give me a ticket?" he squeaks. I inform him that I am not an enforcement officer, but let him know in no uncertain terms that possession of coho salmon is prohibited by law. I show him the correct way to tell the difference between a chinook and a coho salmon, and go about my day.

By lunchtime I have interviewed 40 boatloads of anglers, and seen many fish. I wash my hands, squeeze in a quick bite to eat from the local hot dog stand, and then continue getting my uniform bloody and slimy.

Interviewing anglers and listening to "fish stories" might seem like an easy job, but there is so much more to

being a CRFS sampler. Aside from data collection, sampling is also a public relations job, with the sampler (me) as the focal point for friendly as well as unfriendly anglers.

Two common questions that I hear from anglers are "Why are you collecting this information?" and "What do you do with all those heads?" To answer their questions, I pull out CRFS brochures for them to take home, and explain the importance of the CRFS, what the data are used for, and why we take the salmon heads.

Northwesterly winds begin to pick up in the afternoon, and most of the skiffs are blown off the water by 5 p.m. I'll spend the night tallying up numbers and editing my forms, but I feel good as I drive home, unconsciously picking fish scales from my hands and arms. My work is important for the California recreational fishery. I might not have a single pair of unstained blue jeans, and my car might sometimes smell like fish, but I have done my part for the good of both the fish and the anglers. ♪ ♪ ♪

**For more information about the
California Recreational Fisheries Survey,
visit DFG's Marine Region Web site at
www.dfg.ca.gov/mrd/crfs.html**



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photos by M. Patyten